Using the Perceptions

July 10, 2024

In the sutta we chanted just now, the Buddha makes the point that the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self, are true all the time. Whether there’s a Buddha to point that out or not, everything fabricated is inconstant, it is stressful. All things, all objects of the mind, whether fabricated or not, are not-self. The question is, what do you do with those truths? Because when the Buddha lists his categorical teachings, the ones that are true all the time, they’re not on the list. So how do they fit into the categorical teachings? I take the Four Noble Truths, that’s one of the categorical teachings. There is stress, and there, the Buddha is talking about the stress that comes from craving and clinging. There’s the cause of stress, there’s a cessation of stress, and then there’s the path of succeeding at a cessation of stress. Each of those has a duty. You try to comprehend the stress, you try to abandon the cause, so you can realize the cessation. And you do that by developing the path. So those three perceptions have to find their place within those duties. For example, as you’re trying to comprehend stress, comprehending means that you get rid of all passion, aversion, and delusion around these things. The five aggregates are all fabricated things. And one way of getting rid of passion for them is to see them as inconstant, stressful, not-self. Anicca, the word I’m translating as inconstant, is sometimes translated as impermanent. But sometimes when things are impermanent, it’s a good thing. When you have a disease, when you have a pain, it’s a good thing that it’s impermanent. In that case, it’s not stressful. But when you think of something being inconstant, coming and going, not being reliable, that’s when it gets stressful. It’s like sitting in a chair where one or two of the legs are not cut right, so the chair wobbles and you have to be tense in order to keep the chair on an even keel. So when you try to find some happiness out of the form of your body, or your feelings, or your perceptions, or your thought constructs, or even just the act of consciousness, you’ve got to be prepared for the fact that it’s going to be inconstant. So you look at the things you crave, what in there is really worth craving. When you get to the path, though, things get a little bit more complex, because you are trying to develop the path out of things that are fabricated. Form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, acts of consciousness, these are all needed on the path. You’ve got to put them together. And there, the fact of inconstancy reminds you that you’ve got to be very vigilant, because they could fall apart at any time. It’s so easy for the mind to shift. As the Buddha said, there’s nothing at all that can compare to how fast the mind is to change direction. So you have to be vigilant, you have to develop your mindfulness. So in this case, the teaching on inconstancy teaches you, you’ve got work you’ve got to do, and you’ve got to be very careful, very consistent. You can’t let your guard down. And the fact that the path is stressful, you don’t want to focus on that quite yet. You want to focus on the potential for well-being in the path. Because after all, you’re going to have to work hard to put it together. And all you can see is that it’s stressful. You have a lot of convincing in the mind, convincing the different voices in the mind. There’s nothing to stick with. So instead, you focus on the pleasures of the path. That’s one of the reasons why we practice concentration, is to get a sense of well-being that we can draw on. You’re sitting here focusing on the breath. The breath is inconstant, and there’s some stress in trying to get it adjusted. And sometimes it seems really to have a mind of its own that’s not going to listen to you. And at that point you can say, “Well, it’s a constant stress within myself. I’ll just give up on it.” Which is not in line with the duties of the path. You don’t give up. You keep coming back again and again, trying to figure things out. So whatever difficulties there may be, you admit that, “Yes, this is a fabricated thing you’re putting together, and it’s going to be stressful, but it’s worth it.” And there’s three perceptions more to the distractions that would pull you away. You could spend the hour thinking thoughts of lust, thoughts of anger, thoughts of jealousy. But where do they get you? Whatever pleasure you get out of those things is very short-lived. And the long-term consequences are not what you want. So when a thought comes up in the mind that would pull you away, you can tell yourself, “It’s inconstant, stressful, not-self.” And John Lee has a nice way of looking at these things. He says, “Maybe it’s somebody else sending messages your way. Maybe some spirits hovering around you, or just germs and worms in your blood system, riding around in their little, coursing through your bloodstream.” And they go through your brain, and they may drop off a few thoughts as they head off to other parts of your body. So just because a thought comes up in your mind doesn’t mean you have to lay claim to it as what you think. From the point of view of karma, it’s a result of past karma. But just because you’ve done things in the past that lead to distracting thoughts now doesn’t mean that you have to continue with the job and say, “No, let it go.” So in that case you are, again, working on the things that would be causes for suffering and stress, letting them go by contemplating them as inconstant, stressful, not-self. But as for the concentration, as John Lee points out, you’re trying to make it as constant as you can, as easeful as you can, and as much under your control as you can. You’re fighting against those three perceptions. That’s part of the strategy. That’s how you develop the path. So even though these perceptions are true all the time, you have to know how to use them, when they’re beneficial, when they’re not, when they’re timely, when they’re not, and how to use them. As I said, the perception that your concentration is inconstant is not meant for you to let go of your concentration. It’s for you to get more active in trying to develop it and maintain it and be very protective of it. So learn how to use these things. If you start out with these perceptions and just apply them to everything to let go, you have nothing. As John Lee says, “You let go like a pauper.” In other words, you don’t have a Cadillac or a Mercedes or whatever you would like, in terms of a car. And so you say, “Well, I’ll just let go of that.” When you let go of it, what happens? You’ve got to walk. From John Lee’s point of view, letting go there means developing the good qualities of the path. And then when the path has done its work, you don’t have to carry it around. Think of that image of the man on the raft. Take the raft across the river, and then when you get to the other side, then you can put the raft down. In the case of that man, he never has to go back across the other side of the river. I suppose you did. Well, the raft is there. You’re not carrying it around, but it is there. It has a lot of wealth, and you don’t just throw it away. You put it in a safe place. You don’t carry it around with you. But when you need it, you go home, pick it up, use it to buy whatever you need. So you’ve got all these good things developed. Then you let them go, but they don’t run away from you. As long as you need them, they’re there. So these perceptions are not as straightforward as they might seem. And there’s a skill in learning how to use them, when to use them. As with any of the teachings that are not categorical, remember the Buddhist stipulations about the kind of speech you would engage in. True, beneficial, timely. That applies to all these teachings. There are two that are always timely. On the one hand, there’s the teaching that skillful qualities should be developed, unskillful ones should be abandoned. Then there’s the Four Noble Truths and the duties appropriate to them. Those are always true. With everything else, you have to figure out time and place. That requires that you use your ingenuity, that you use your powers of observation. And that you think strategically. This is what makes this path a skill. If it were just one thing you did over and over again, noting, noting, noting, scanning, scanning, scanning, there wouldn’t be much skill. I was reading a while back about a Buddhist sect in Japan where they forced the monks to go on kind of a marathon every year, all over Japan. Of course, the monks who do well are the ones who have just lots and lots and lots of persistence. But you listen to them talk, you listen to their Dharma, and there’s not much there. It’s just all persistence. And although persistence is one of the qualities we have to develop, it’s not the only one. We’re working on a Middle Path. Things are easy. In a sense, you don’t have to think much about them. They may be hard to follow, but they don’t involve much subtlety. You just push your way through. As John Fuller once said, “If nibbana was the sort of thing you could push your way into, everybody would push their way there by now.” It’s a lot more subtle. You see the subtlety in your path. You see that the path requires that you learn to be subtle. And you see a lot of things you never saw before.

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